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ABSTRACT

A mother of a highly gifted son gives her observations of life with a gifted child, the educational needs of the gifted, and suggestions to teachers of the gifted. Stressed throughout is the fact that gifted children are first and foremost children with all the needs and characteristics of children. Stereotypes of the gifted child are exposed illustrated by anecdotes of experiences with individual gifted children and groups of gifted children. (DB)

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SIT DOWN, SHUT UP, OR GET OUT

A mother's message to teachers of gifted students.

Judith Reardon Rossmiller

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

I am the parent of a gifted child.

I have a message for teachers of gifted children. I include teachers of an official gifted classroom, the egghead playpen, teachers with one or two gifted children in a regular classroom, and teachers who claim they do not presently have a gifted child in ~~your~~ their classroom. And they never will.

I saw a gifted child in his bed, asleep, last night. You saw him in the classroom. I typed his essay. You probably read it today. I was thrilled with his first word. You have trouble keeping him quiet. You very well might wish you didn't have a gifted child in your room. I don't have a choice.

Frankly, I can sympathize with teachers who are less than thrilled with the responsibility of a gifted student. They wreck havoc with the predictability element of teaching, just as they do with mothering.

I became aware of a disconcerting phrase a few years ago: severly gifted. It sounded more like a disease than a blessing. And it was, and is, sometimes considered a disease. The "upper two percenters" have been termed severe to equate them ~~to~~ with those other two percenters, the severely retarded, in order to receive equal funding. When brilliance becomes a minority problem, the money is more likely to be forthcoming. Good thing, too. But

the verbiage is disturbing. The archaic term, "severely gifted" is, a chilling reminder that to some excellence of brain is akin to malfunction of the brain. Who was it that said that genius is akin to maddness? The dark ages leave us slowly.

I defend that mysterious child. The same child, who, on any given day, can destroy a carefully prepared lesson plan by providing answers before the questions are asked, by acting superior, ("I learned all of this long ago.") by being a general nusiance who creates more work for the teacher , who wants very badly to say, "Sit down, shut up, or get out."

What is a gifted child? Many lengthy definitions have been offered and most teachers have read them all with wry skepticism, with dubious enthusiasm. Most of them speak of high achievement, occasionally, high grades. To state the one definition would be like attempting to define the flu. There are so many symptoms and combinations of symptoms that I have chosen the following as my favorite definition.

In a book entitled, The Gifted Child, the Family, and the Community, edited for the American Association for Gifted Children by Bernard Miller and Merle Price, a gifted child is "one whose performance in a potentially valuable line of human activity is consistently remarkable."

Remarkable activity...that means the possibility of achievement on a very high level, ability to succeed at difficult tasks, strong desires to understand, comprehension of complicated relationships. But remarkable is often a disadvantage as well. It is one of the great unknowns how many students hide their remarkableness so well that their special light could become forever extinguished. It isn't always popular to think better and faster and deeper. With no one to guide him, a gifted student may choose to sit in a classroom pretending to be normal. Or less. He's smart enough to know how to act dumb. So the others will like him.

I know ~~that~~ it happens. My child pulled that one once. In fact, it was the grand tip-off for us, the moderately unperceptive parents. I always thought he was bright, after all he was my child. But it had never entered my mind that he was brighter than I was.

He was eleven years old when the term "severely gifted" was applied to him. A teacher pointed out that some of the baby babblings I had recorded in his baby book as cute sayings, were unusual for a five year old. His concepts at that time about God and eternity stirred her curiosity. But more than what he had said and done was what he wasn't doing. In the classroom that year his grades and his responses were becoming dull, average, easy. His questions ceased. His hand no longer shot up. Testing

was recommended. The teacher who identified his giftedness was not his classroom teacher that year. Or any other year till then. It was a family friend who observed him at the dinner table, at play, in his home. She saw him as one, not one of twenty-five who won't need remedial reading, thank goodness.

I cast no stones for his school teachers not recognizing him. I didn't recognize his gift, either. But maybe we both would the next time.

In a book entitled, Characteristics and Identification of Gifted and Talented Students by Frederick B. Tuttle and Laurence Becker, it is recorded that a gifted high school student once wrote:

> I stopped asking questions in my calculus class, since I obviously annoyed the professor. kept seeing new connections that he hadn't explained and didn't intend to. The non-math lovers resented my questions, too, since they didn't want to be further confused.

Some educators ask, "Why help gifted children. They have everything." Or, "Let's fund the slow learners and the lucky ones teach themselves." What's wrong with that?

What's wrong is that gifted children are not automatically perfect persons. Some of these children are bewildered. They often don't have a mature, well-balanced outlook on life. The help they need may differ from the help average students need,

but they need their kind of help, just as much. Maybe more.

The first thing we must remember about gifted children is that they are children. Like other children, they lose their baby teeth, cry, laugh, suffer the same glories and pains of growing up. Because they sometimes understand algebraic equations long before their peers, and occasionally use big words correctly, teachers and people might think they have their lives handled. Wrong. Gifted children need adult help to become what they can become, even it it is more than the helping adult could ever become. They are very sensitive to being in the way, sensitive to comments regarding their differentness. To some children, different spells disaster.

Is it any wonder they are different? Gifted children, like the fabled three headed monster, are mysterious and fascinating combinations of three ages, chronological, emotional, and mental. Ten year old gifted girls giggle like ten year olds. Fourteen year old gifted boys saunter just like the others. But add to the confustion of these two ages in one body, the third and most baffling age of all, a mental age. Often a gifted child will be identified with a mental age three, four, five, maybe even six years ahead of his chronological age. This gives him the mental abilities of a far older child, the lightening logic, the instant perception, the rapid insight. Stir these things together and

what do you get? A boy, who looks just like any other boy, yet different somehow, a girl, seeming to be a normal girl, and yet...

No one has told them how to get their ages working well together. And they wonder sometimes. They wonder why others their size don't think the same thoughts, don't wonder. Yes, they need a hand to help them through the maze. Teachers have that hand. Testimony to the key role of the teacher is in a poem, "The Wall" found in The World of the Gifted Child by Pricilla L. Vail.

They laughed at me.
They laughed at me and called me names.
They wouldn't let me join their games.
I couldn't understand.
I spent most playtimes on my own.
Everywhere I was alone.
Teachers told me I was rude.
Bumptious, over-bearing, shrewd.
Some of the things they said were curde.
I couldn't understand.
And so I built myself a wall.
Strong and solid, ten foot tall.
With bricks you couldn't see at all,
So I could understand.

And then came Sir, (with a capital S)
A jovial, beaming, kindly man,
Saw through my wall and took my hand
And the bricks came tumbling down,
For he could understand.
And now I laugh with them,
Not in any unkind way,
For they have yet to face their day
And the lessons I have learned.

For eagles soar above all birds
And scavengers need to hunt in herds.
But the lion walks alone.
And now I understand.

Often a gifted program in a school enjoys goldfish bowl status and zoo tactics. Is it any wonder some gifted students in special programs exhibit arrogance? Once identified, gifted children often find themselves under the microscope. Sometimes hand-wringing administrators must test them and test them and test them again, to document the extra dollars for the program. Test scores are madly waved in proof of need for the money to continue the exhibit. These are necessary tactics, but not lost for a moment on the members of the exhibit.

These monkeyshines will not diminish the achievement of students. Their brains remain intact under survaillance and under fire. They are usually far more interested in why a circle is endless than why the tests are endless. And while they are pondering the morality of war or the Pythagorian theorum, their ninth achievement test of the year is madly racing through a computer, clicking off neatly, "twelvth year, ninth month, eleventh year, eighth month..." Of course they know what is going on. They aren't dumb. Is it any wonder they occasionally act superior?

But when the day is finally over what they really are is starved. And their worries revolve around football games and hair styles. In and out they go. They flit like lightning and butterflies.

Some of my observations about gifted children come from an actual

As a trained Great Books teacher, a lay person, I was supposedly qualified to team teach a group of fifteen interested students and to lead class discussions on classic works of literature. My assigned classroom was a composite 4th, 5th, and 6th grade classroomfull of gifted students. I feared these mental giants would instantly detect my normalcy and leer at me disdainfully through three inch spectacles.

When I first entered the classroom, for the first session, they totally ignored me. The severely gifted speciman, not unlike the gorilla at the zoo, was oblivious to observation.

And the chaos in that room! It reminded me of my non-gifted home. An argument in the back of the room went like this:

"Yes, I did."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"No. I didn't."

Nothing gifted there. The teacher at that moment was being looked down on by a very tall boy, obviously a basketball player, who was complaining with a familiar whine, "Do I really have to read this? All of it? It's so long and boring."

And Brett, dear sweet Brett, who eventually stole my heart.

Brett was chugging his long pi
faint, "Choo choo choo."

I knew I was in the righ
Suddenly suspect ~~was~~ of the syst
for this group of elites.
acted like the constant strea
path between the basketball n
acted like many whose tossled
sleeping bags at bunking par
I'd carried around for 40
generously with with "hey ma
smiling black boy with larg
teacher, who was wearing a
"Momma, yer colors is talkin'

Their physical appearance gav
interest that in the 1930's it
had large heads and brains w
This gifted assortment spanne
huge, odd to beautiful, and i
entry I.Q. was 140, I observed

nk eraser across his desk with a

t room because my son was there, but was
em of identification and selection
These kids gifted? Hardly. They
m of boys in my house, beating a
et and the refrigerator. The girls
heads I"d observed emerging from
ties. Where was the quiz kid image
years? Their speech was laced
n" and "ya know" and one eternally
e white teeth once said to his
bright yellow bow on her blouse,
t' me!"

e no clues, either. It is of
was believed that gifted children
ere measured with a tape measure.
d the possibilities from petite to
n this particular room, where the
15 kids in 15 stages of puberty.

How do we identify our gifted children?

I, for one, am perfectly satisfied with the school system's fail-safe method of testing for giftedness. Even Houdinni couldn't work his way to the top of all the tests necessary for identification. The trick is to identify the child to be tested. Some teachers are remarkably inadequate judges of a student's mental flexibility.

Once singled out, students are given a monumental battery of tests by a recognized evaluation expert who determines mental age. Mental age, divided by chronological age is I.Q.

I share a weakness of some teachers. I am charmed by verbal, poised children who are delightful conversationalists and eager, interested persons. When I was a Brownie leader I subconsciously classified all the talkative Brownies as very smart, and the quiet ones who thought my projects dull and boring, of questionable intelligence. I've since learned. The pensive child, pondering the path of a spider across a windowpane might well be reinventing a physics principal and honestly have neither the need nor interest in talking to a teacher. Or a Brownie leader.

The high test scorer and the verbal child are not the end of the

story. Seldom do children or parents of children with the high test scores quarrel with the results. To test 60 points above average does not necessarily invalidate a test. But a score below the norm, or near the norm when the student gave evidence to the contrary, could, and should alert the teacher. But for a teacher guessing, we might not have known.

Beyond the I.Q. and other tests, there are many similar traits of gifted children that occur to me, a parent, not a teacher. New material seems to be "recognized" more than learned. It is as though the child already knew the concept, but it came alive by being mentioned. It can be annoying. I know a six year old miss who listens gravely while something is being explained. At the finish, she will cock her head and say, seriously, "Yes, that's true. I've always thought so." God bless the teacher who will be able to teach that child something she doesn't already know. And advance warning, though. She's likely to "know" what is said the instant the words are spoken. Instant recognition.

~~The~~Another unique quality is the noticing of patterns, associating one thing with another, automatically, and not by being taught. When my husband received his final degree, our gifted son had just celebrated his third birthday with many presents. When my husband opened a gift, the three year old said, "Now you're three." And when his father put on his cap,

the child said, "Now, you're a king,." pointing to the cap. And then, with a quickness we recognized only later, reading the baby book, he began to sing, and continued to sing throughout the day, what seemed perfectly logical to him, "We three kings of Orient are..." Christmas carols in May amused all of us and our friends.

To sum up and draw together the ragged edges of these small and great persons, let me conclude with my observations that first day in the gifted classrooms. I was the newcomer, the untrained and uninformed and my impressions were those of a parent. As the hour wore on, I progressed from skepticism to awe. Within five minutes the group was intently analyzing a short story by Rudyard Kipling, arguing like hot-blooded, cut-throat attorneys, over the symbolism intended by the author.

Brett still moved his eraser across the desk. But instead of "choo choo," the nine year old with an emotional age of seven and a mental age of fourteen, said, "You guys missed the whole point. The tiger was God huntin' after their souls."

The tall boy burst out, "God? You're nuts. On page 63 he is described as 'demonic' and on page 71, as 'satonic.'

Sweet Melony smiled like an angel and said, softly, "You're

reading too much into it. The tiger was just a tiger. God was the omniscient author."

Within ten minutes of my humble departure that day, I'm sure the talk was once again of basketball and ballet and bubblegum. With such ease was the transition made from metaphysics to mundane, that their remarkableness might easily be overlooked...unless one was looking.

With keen and deadly accurate mental leaps, gifted students bypass like lightning some of the normal steps of learning and logic like ice skaters skimming past a thousand trees on shore.

As a mother and outside observer, outside the classroom, that is, I ask the educators to be the "Sir" in some gifted child's life. If they are encouraged, the blessed few may mark their allotted time in life with gifts from their gifts, insights from their insights, and one day, through them, may issue forth the beginning of the end of some of the miseries on earth.

Today's severly gifted must walk into challenge every day and must be kept challenged, for the challenges of the future will likely be in their hands. Take the time to take them aside. Show them many things and many ways and let them dream up more. Keep them enthusiastic about their flights of fancy. For if they

drift in the classroom, taking care of themselves, while the teacher takes care of the normal needy, I shall find our educational system worse than inadequate. It will be wasteful.

One day someone in the "upper two percent" may find a way to eliminate the creation of the "lower two percent."

One day a former gifted child will probably be your leader.

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